

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Robarts, Dwight (2007) "For Their Sake: Reflectios on Ministry (Colossians 1.24-25)," *Leaven*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol15/iss2/3>

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For Their Sake: Reflections on Ministry (Colossians 1.24–25)

DWIGHT ROBARTS

In the New Testament, the dominant model for ministry is an instrument of death, which poses a significant challenge for the Christian church. Paul thought that the cross of Christ served the church as its primary motivation and model of ministry. At baptism, God commissions all believers as ministers and therefore servants of the church for which Jesus died, and he commissions them as ministers to the world, which he loves. To follow Jesus means that we die to self, take up the cross, and serve the church and the world as he did.

As a servant of the gospel, responsible for both preaching and pastoral leadership in the church, I find Paul's commitment to his mission and concern for the church in Colossians 1.24–2.5 to be instructive, inspiring, and indicting. Here, Paul did not write to preachers, but to the faithful members of the church, both men and women, all of whom he viewed as ministers. A visiting evangelist at a church where I once worked said that we should remove the preacher's name from the signs in front of our churches where it says *Minister* and replace it with this phrase—*All of the Members of this Church*. This reflects Paul's sentiments, but for all of my adult life I have served the church as a professional teacher, pastor, and leader and much of what I say here reflects that experience.

Paul knew a few people in the church, but says that he had never visited Colossae and so with this letter he attempts to arouse goodwill among believing strangers even as he boldly calls for them to imitate him. Paul aims to secure good will by rehearsing his actions in their behalf. He rejoices in what he suffered for them, which is even more astonishing since he did not plant the church and was a stranger to most of them. He said that he fills up what was incomplete about Christ's passion and he did this for the sake of the church. God commissioned him to serve by presenting the whole gospel and by announcing in word and deed the revelation of God's very old and very rich mystery, which is that Christ has now taken up residence in the Gentiles too and this is our hope of glory. Paul carries out his divine commission by proclaiming Christ and by instructing, counseling, and cautioning the church.

Paul's purpose in all of this is to present everyone mature in Christ. He toils and struggles to execute this mission, but he does so with the powerful resource of Christ's own energy. He toils and struggles for the sake of the church and not for his own honor. He believes that his own faithful struggle and suffering will encourage and unite others so that they may understand God's mystery, which again is Christ. This common bond inoculates the church against the deceptive and destructive arguments of the world. Paul tells the church of his own suffering in order to form a peculiar kind of community, one shaped by the gospel of the cross. This cruciform colony exists apart from the world, but at the same time, it exists for the sake of the world.

To sum up thus far, Paul's ministry aims in two directions. The first is toward himself. Paul served the church based on his commission from God. Paul saw his ministry as a trust, a stewardship, a holy office, which pointed him in the second direction of his ministry, the church. He suffered, proclaimed, toiled,

warned and taught, all for the sake of the church. Based on this powerful commission, I offer the following observations about ministry.

Service: Paul's ambition was to see the church mature in Christ.¹ Consequently, he defines leadership in a very counter-cultural way. In the world of Paul's day, leadership was about status, power, and honor. Since the church is part of God's kingdom and is rooted in the gospel, the worldly standards of power, wealth, wisdom, intellect, and status are out of place. Paul saw in Jesus' death the central pattern of ministry, discipleship, and leadership. Since God forms his church around the cross, the central characteristic of leadership is self-denying service. The cross as both stimulus and standard for Christian ministry seems lost on many of us. Faithful ministers do not minister to in order to gain status, feed their ego, win at the church game, or take their place among the wealthy.

Paul saw himself first and last as a servant. Efrain Agosto observes that in his letters, Paul mimics other writers of his day in commending friends, coworkers, acquaintances, and the recipients of his letters, but he commends them on a completely different basis. He commends others by using what Agosto calls the three participles of service. Paul extols those who work or engage in hard work, those who lead by serving, and those who have responsibility for the church in the sense of counseling, admonishing, and offering good advice or instruction.

For example, in Colossians, Paul commends the evangelist Epaphras as "our dear fellow servant and faithful minister" and as "one who works hard for you and those who are at Laodocia and Hierapolis." In addition, he commends Tychicus as a "faithful minister and fellow servant." Paul not only saw himself as a servant, but he demanded the same from his coworkers. He praises them for their service and their willingness to take risks for the sake of the church and not for their status. For Paul, there is no ministry as office or position alone. True ministry involves self-denying service.²

I must admit in my own life and ministry that I am a mixed bag of commitments and motivations. I want to believe that I preach, teach, pastor, and lead in order to serve God and a church that both have been very good to me; however, I enjoy the status, the authority, and the strokes to my ego that ministry brings. I find Paul's words here an indictment of that dark side of me that is insatiable in its pursuit of what pleases me. My hope is that as I recognize and confront the powerful temptations associated with ministry, these words will call me back to my divine commission, which God gave me for the sake of the church. One reason I resist Paul's radical concept of ministry is that it brings suffering.

Suffering: Paul rejoiced that he suffered and that he was able to fill up what was lacking in Christ's suffering. It is beyond my imagination that Paul believed that Christ's sufferings were inadequate for our salvation. Rather, Paul believed that Christ's sufferings foreshadowed those of his followers and fellow ministers. J.B. Lightfoot said that there is nothing lacking in Christ's sufferings in regards to their power to provide forgiveness because Christ's passion was the one full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. "It is simply a matter of fact that the afflictions of every saint and martyr do supplement the afflictions of Christ" by building up the church through repeated acts of self-denial in each generation.³ Paul believed that Christians are destined to suffer. No doubt in this case Paul had in mind his imprisonment at the time that he wrote Colossians, as well as other indignities that he had endured such as those he alluded to in 2 Corinthians 11.23–28.

Some Christians today suffer physical abuse, torture, hunger, humiliation, and death as Paul did, but most contemporary Christians in the West do not know this kind of suffering. Paul did suffer in another way. He speaks in 2 Corinthians 11.29 of "the daily pressure of my concern for the church." Paul wrote that since he had heard of the birth of the Colossian church, he had prayed for them daily. He cared deeply

1. James Thompson argues that that transformation of the church is the center of Paul's theology. James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

2. See Efrain Agosto, *Servant Leadership: Jesus and Paul* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005).

3. J. B. Lightfoot. *The Crossway Classic Commentaries: Colossians and Philemon* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 82-83.

about their spiritual growth and development. Ministers who care deeply about churches, who live in those churches, who attend to those churches may often find themselves like Paul in Galatians 4.19, "I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." The way of a church is three steps forward and two steps back; or sometimes it is two steps forward and three steps back. Like Paul, most ministers suffer anxiety over the church's progress.

Churches are messy places to live and work these days. Generational tension, rapid change, a culture more hostile to the church than in previous years, the increasing diversity of congregations, the frequent testing of authority by some members, and a consumer mentality among other members test our resolve and our ministry skills. Often churches need someone to blame for failure to thrive, lack of growth, and other failures, and they usually direct this blame at ministers and elders. Some members have two gifts to offer the church: criticism and complaining. Those most adept at these skills often contribute little else. Yet, my late father once said, "You have to have thick skin to serve churches, but you should listen to your critics. Most of what they say is not worth keeping, but they will tell you things you need to know when no one else will." Truth and lies have one thing in common; both wound ministers. The truth can be a faithful wound.

Suffering that grows out of conflict goes with today's ministry territory. Reggie McNeal urges ministers to die to the expectation that everyone will love you. People will not love a minister just because he or she is trying to do God's work. People in churches place the greatest value on their relationships, which is why ministers are almost always expendable in a conflict. To deal with this, McNeal urges ministers to weigh criticism, listen behind the criticism, evaluate the critic's motives, look in the mirror (do they have a point?), and remember the vision.⁴ Vision makes the conflict easier to survive. Paul offered us that vision when he said that we struggle to present everyone perfect in Christ. Ministers endure conflict to secure the blessings of God for the church.⁵ In addition, it is important for ministers to remember that our critics are not our enemies. We wage a battle with destructive unseen powers.

In the middle of suffering from conflict, remembering our identity as servants of the church helps. Pride is a formidable enemy to our self-identity as servants. In conflict, our pride demands that we win because we believe that we are right and that our leadership is at stake. As long as our lives and reputations as ministers are so vital, we cannot slow down long enough to examine our motives and to reflect on what is best for the church in a conflict. Do I lay this conflict down for the sake of the church? Do I carry it through to the end for the sake of the church? Or, is some other approach best for the church? Suffering conflict shapes ministers and provides opportunity for ministry for the sake of the church.

I find that, for me, a huge issue in responding to conflict is my need for approval. Both Jesus and Paul seemed to rely on God alone for approval. This means that one's relationship with God is the fundamental issue in effective ministry.

Part of the issue at Colossae was the nature of the gospel. Some leaders offered a more predictable ministry strategy and a tested and tried "buyer protection plan" for God's people—"don't touch, don't taste, don't handle." In every generation the temptation to find our hope for glory in something or someone other than Christ threatens the church and disturbs its peace. Faithful ministry is consumed with presenting to the church the word of God in its fullness. For Paul and all of his contemporary colleagues, this commitment constitutes a sacred commission or trust.

Paul predominately saw himself as a servant of the church, but how does one faithfully and effectively serve a church where one group demands one thing, and another the opposite. In our text Paul gives us a clue to one good approach—seeking the good will of the church by modeling for them the behavior that God wants. In a day when many Christians see churches as a dispenser of goods and services, the minister

4. Reggie McNeal, *A Work of the Heart: Understanding How God Shapes Spiritual Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 158ff.

5. *Ibid.*, 28-29.

must be willing to show another way—service and sacrifice. This likely means sacrificing our personal visions and dreams for the church and instead helping the church find God’s preferred and promised future for them.

Fulfilling my commission, as a servant for the sake of the church, often seems unattainable. On most days, I want to run from suffering whether it involves conflict or criticism. I detect that Paul may have found himself in a similar place. If I have to rely on my education and training (as good as they may have been), or my wisdom, or on my intellect then ministry overwhelms me. Paul says that we do not do this on our own. We struggle “with all his energy, which so powerfully works in us.” Thanks be to God! On my own, I fail, but with Christ’s energy powerfully working in me, I can minister “for their sake.”

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